

# RUSSIA ON THE BRINK OF WAR

Precursors to the Revolution (1860-1917)

**R**ussian peasants had been exploited for centuries. Serfdom, a system similar to slavery that tied poor peasants to the lands of wealthy landowners, had existed in Russia until 1861. Only the poor served in the military, and their terms were 25 years. Most of Russia's population (80-90%) lived at subsistence level. In 1897, 79 percent of the population was illiterate, keeping them out of positions of influence.

Under Tsar Alexander II, the poor made some headway. Alexander abolished serfdom in 1861, established legal equality for rich and poor in 1864, shortened military terms to six years, and made military conscription universal in 1874. But the next two Tsars, Alexander III and Nicholas II, opposed reform and sent many revolutionaries to Siberia.

Russia industrialized late, between 1890 and 1900. Coal, iron, and steel industries developed in the Ukraine, oil in the Caucasus, and textile factories in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Trans-Siberian Railway, built between 1891 and 1905, improved transportation within the Empire. People moved to cities, where they worked long hours in factories and lived in overcrowded urban slums. A new industrial working class demanded higher wages, fair representation, and civil rights.

Several socialist parties emerged among the peasant and working class around the turn of the century. The Russian Social and Democratic Labor Party formed in 1898. In 1903, it split into the Mensheviks and the more radical Bolsheviks (led by Vladimir Lenin). Each of these parties sought land reform, more equitable distribution of wealth within Russia, and representational government.

In 1905, most Russians still suffered from low wages and heavy taxation. In January, police fired on demonstrators in St. Petersburg, killing or wounding 1000. Strikes continued through the year, and in October, Nicholas II issued the October Manifesto, promising the Russian people civil liberties, including a parliament



**Alexander II (1855-1881) ended serfdom and introduced social reforms**, but the subsequent two Tsars' reluctance to grant rights to the Russian peasantry sparked the bloody Russian Revolution.

(Duma) elected by the people, and a constitution. Soviets (councils) were formed in the major cities to represent workers' interests.

However, Nicholas II could not give up power. He insisted on his right to declare war and to appoint ministers who did not answer to the Duma. He disbanded the Duma when it disagreed with him. His Prime Minister, Peter Stolypin, executed so many critics that the hangman's noose became known as "Stolypin's necktie." However, Stolypin introduced land reform in 1906, and by 1915, about half of the peasants in western Russia owned farms.

Russia entered World War I in 1914, but the Russians were no match for their highly-industrialized

opponent, Germany. Russian soldiers lacked training and had inadequate arms and supplies. Their losses were catastrophic. Food prices quadruped during the war, and by 1916, Petrograd and Moscow were only receiving a third of the fuel and food they needed. By 1917, Russians were completely fed up with the Tsar.

On February 24, 1917, 300,000 workers demonstrated for reform in Petrograd. Nicholas II left his capital city and ordered his troops to put down the demonstrations, but the troops joined the strikers and forced Nicholas II to abdicate, ending Tsarist rule in Russia.

A provisional government was established to rule until an assembly could draw up a new constitution. The new government faced opposition, peasant land seizures, nationalist independence movements, and a losing war. The provisional government reorganized four times between March and October. Finally, the Bolsheviks won the support of the hungry workers and soldiers with their promise of "peace, land, and bread." On October 24-25, the Bolsheviks took over the government, and launched a bloody, five-year revolution to secure power and establish communism in Russia.